CLOSE READING AND COMPREHENSION

Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, you will be able to understand the following:

❐ What is close reading ?
❐ Aim of close reading
❐ How to do a close reading?
❐ Why engage in close reading?
❐ What helps to improve reading comprehension?
❐ Language skills needed for comprehension
❐ Components of effective reading and better comprehension :
❐ Need for comprehension
❐ Strategies to improve comprehension

CLOSE READING

WHAT IS CLOSE READING?

Close reading is an intense analysis of text

Close reading is just figuring out what the text is saying. The text doesn't give up its meaning easily. It requires a little bit of work to figure out what it is trying to say A process of reading that helps a reader to uncover the layers of meaning and lead to an understanding or comprehension of the text in hand is called close reading. When a text is examined in class with the purpose of close reading the aim is to make the student read, re-read, analyze and examine the context methodically in a deliberate fashion so as the empower and enable the students to understand the central ideas and the key supporting details inherent in the text. The focus is on individual word-meanings and sentences, the progression of thoughts and ideas, the order in which the content is unfolded and ultimately the complete understanding of the piece in hand. It is a step by step evolutionary process that involves sustained and conscious effort. For years, students have been exposed to comprehension passages in schools and colleges yet their interpretation or reading is limited to solving 'unseen passages' that necessarily form a part of the question papers during examination. The 'passages', usually mundane are randomly selected followed by stereotypical questions and the aim of "teaching" how to read seems to be fulfilled. We hardly come across students who are excited to read. Lack of comprehension, especially informational texts and failure to connect with the various layers of meaning embedded in the text makes the process of reading a herculean activity.

Close reading is not modeled on the pattern that 'Students read and the teacher questions and evaluates'. Instead the teacher only facilitates and guides the students to dig and dwell what appears on the surface and beneath the surface of a text. They dissect how a text is organised and assess the use of language. It requires thorough thinking and methodical analysis. Ultimately the student evaluates and critiques the text by answering the questions asked.

Aim of Close Reading

Essentially, close reading is a key component for college and career readiness. The aim is to equip you with the right technique. It empowers you in the following ways:

1. Provides micro levels of understanding
2. Teaches you to locate the evidence within a sentence or paragraph
3. Teaches you to recreate or retell the main idea/story/message contained in the text.
4. Teaches you to justify with evidence the answers provided to the questions asked.
5. Teaches you to make connections to the text.
6. Teaches you to look beneath the surface of the text instead of just grazing the surface.
7. Teaches you to infer vocabulary based questions by placing the words in their proper context
8. Teaches you to identify, look back and cite the text to answer the questions asked.
9. Teaches you to analyze Flow Charts, Graphs, Venn Diagrams, Tree diagrams, Cross Sections, etc.
So, to say it briefly
The aim of close reading is to activate good reading strategies and to make you reflect on "How and What to Think"? about a text.
Recap
Read Re-Read Process the
information
Reflect and
connect
Analyse the use
of language/
syntax

How to Do Close Reading
There are 4 things that you need to consider while doing a close reading.
Useful Tips
Ask yourself as you read:

- What was the main idea?
- Do you know the Author's purpose?
- Who was the intended audience?
- Are you able to identify the illustrations and details used that help to describe characters or situations?

Reading is a process that involves decoding of information in a text. This decoding depends on your ability to read, understand and interpret words phrases, sentence and symbols inherent in a text and the message that these written words or visuals convey. When we talk of meaning we have to keep in mind that there are a lot of other aspects of meaning that you have to be aware of when interpreting a text. This is called Polysemy or multiple meaning. Let us take an example. The word "fair" can be used to denote many things.

1. She has a fair chance of winning the competition. (adjective : meaning reasonable)
2. She has a fair hair (fair means light opposite of dark)
3. That is not a fair thing to say (adjective meaning 'just')
4. His knowledge of Hindi is fair (adjective meaning not very good nor very bad)
5. The handsome hero fell in love with the fair maid (fair meaning beautiful)

Along with Polysemy (multiple meanings) English has a lot of different words with similar but slightly different meanings. For example, the word fair in the dictionary may be interpreted as light, blonde, pale, colourless, bleach. The term for such similar words is synonymy. In analyzing the text during a close reading we also need to know collocations and connotations.

The word collocation means that certain words are used with each other in fairly fixed ways in English. All synonyms of the word cannot be replaced in the original. For example, 'Fair' can be used to denote hair, as can be blonde and bleached (though the meaning they convey may be slightly different) but you cannot use 'pale' and 'colourless' which usually collates with 'gas' or 'liquid'.

Connotation implies that words not only have meanings, they also have associations. It is important to know what connotation a word had. For example, "Snow White", "the fairer sex", "who's the fairest of them all" have connotations in English fairy tales and need to be understood in proper context before interpreting a text. Knowledge of the variety of meanings a word may convey facilitates close reading. In order to read well one needs to engage in the process of what we call close reading. To understand what is important and worthy in a text requires the active use of intellectual skills. You need to master the art of close reading and practice it closely. The skill lies in reading purposely not blindly. Have an agenda, goal or

objective when you read. This helps to shape the nature of what you read and how you read. The pattern varies according to situation and purpose. However the universal purpose at the core of all reading is to figure out what the writer has to say on the given subject. When a writer writes he/she usually gives words to thoughts and ideas. When we read we try to translate words into meaning.

It is an analytic, evaluative and creative task to mirror the intent of the writer accurately without distortion of the original. How we read depends on what we read. We apply different mindsets while reading textbooks, newspapers, history books or magazines. Once we recognize this variability we focus on the reading skills and reading tools that we would apply to the text in hand. This leads to productive reading where the purpose of reading is aligned with the author's purpose in writing. Thus, close reading engages you in the act of synthesis. You dissect the text into its composite elements and also discuss how these elements come together to form a whole.

Create your concentric circles or your knowledge map for close reading

Primary ideas
Secondary ideas
Peripheral ideas

A close reading operates on the premise that any artistic creation will be more fully understood and appreciated to the extent that the nature and interrelations of its parts are perceived and that understanding will take the form of insight into the theme of the work in question. This kind of work must be done before you can begin to appropriate any theoretical or specific approach . (The Literary Link Ed. Jamica E. Patten June 2, 1998 San Jose University Website 17 September, 2003.

Why engage in close reading

To explicate comes from the latin word explicare, meaning to unfold, to fold out or to make clear the meaning of. When you close read, you observe facts and details about the text. Your aim is to notice all striking features of the text including rhetorical features, structural elements, cultural references or allusions. A close reading should be more than a list of devices though. The essay should emerge more from observation of particular facts

Purposes of Close Reading Pleasure Knowledge Information Appreciation Understanding and details to a conclusion or interpretation based on those observations. What do these data add up to mean … (Patrica Kair, "How to do close reading" 1998 Harvard University Writing Centre Website 17 September 2003)

Role of Teachers and Students in Close Reading

S. No. Teachers Students
1. To select appropriate text To read the text more than once.
2. To ensure and anticipate that the text poses potential challenge the student. To analyze the content language and purpose of text
3. To ask questions that are interpretive in nature To unlayer the various folds embedded in the text to understand it better
4. To engage in rigorous discussions that help students gain deeper insight in the texts hidden meaning. To read and reread the text till there is thorough comprehension of the text.
5. To avoid digression and help students to remain focused on the text. To participate in discussions that help to comprehend the text better. How many times does one read a text for close Reading? Timothy Shanahan, an expert in literacy teaching and curricular recommends at least three readings of the text in which the main purpose is aligned with the three main categories of the ELA Anchor Standard for reading : Key ideas and details, craft and structure and integration of knowledge and ideas.
Source : Page 29 of (46) PDF on Close Reading

Text Selection for Close Reading
The type of text for close reading depends on the purpose of reading. The factors that can be kept in mind while selecting a text may be listed as under:
1. Text should have sufficient stimulation.
2. Text should have sufficient richness in context.
3. Text should have sufficient complexity to challenge readers.
4. Text should be appropriate to the age of the reader.

Comprehension
The word comprehension is derived from the word 'comprehend' which mean "to understand". Reading comprehension is the ability to read a text and to be able to process it and understand it. The ability of an individual to comprehend a text is determined and influenced by various learning traits and skills. It also depends to a large extent on an individual's ability to draw inferences after reading a text. There are many reading strategies like skimming and scanning which one may use to read a text. The choice of the reading strategy adopted also depends on the type of text and the level of comprehension required. According to M Craik and Robert S Text may studied at two levels

i. Low Level: This requires shallow processing and superficial reading to arrive at a gist of the matter. It involves structural and phonemic recognition, the processing of sentence, the word structure and their associated sound.

ii. High Level: This requires a deep processing of the text and you may have to delve into details to arrive at specific conclusions. It involves semantic processing which usually happens when we encode the meaning of a word and relate it to similar words. (adapted from Fergus I. N. Craik and Robert S. Lockhart)

Comprehension is a creative multifaceted process. It is the level of understanding that an individual reaches in reading a text. The understanding of the text in hand depends upon the interaction of the words in the text and the level to which they trigger your knowledge. It also depends on your proficiency in reading i.e. your ability to recognize words quickly and effortlessly.

It also depends on the cognitive development of a person which enables him/her to link his/her thought process to the text in hand. What helps to improve reading comprehension ?

- Rich vocabulary
- Education
- Direct experience
- Well developed language
- Instruction
- Knowledge of subject
- Ability to make inferences
- Self correcting approach

Language skills needed for comprehension
- Phonology
- Syntax
- Semantics
- Pragmatics

Components of effective Reading and better comprehension:
- Ability to interpret and evaluate information and ideas
- Ability to link or connect this information to what you already know
- Ability to adjust the current knowledge to accommodate new ideas and look at them with a fresh perspective
- Ability to identify the main idea and key points in the text
- Ability to read between the lines to understand underlying meanings.

Need for Comprehension
Reading comprehension skills are needed for meaningful and effective reading. The key to improving reading comprehension skill is to attack weak cognitive skills at foundation level. You have to bridge the gap from passive to active reading. It

enhances your ability to understand what you read – where words have context and texts have meaning. Comprehending skills allow you to read proficiently learn effectively, problem solve, strategize and conceptualize. It helps you to move from elementary reading to effective reading.

Comprehension skills teach you to construct meaning from what you read. There are specific techniques that can help develop this skill – read aloud, shared reading, independent reading, guided reading etc. Meaning may be constructed through reviewing, re-reading portions of the text ,discussion and thoughtful reflection. You learn to predict, infer, synthesize information and link it to your day to day experience. There are many factors that make it easier to understand text. For example, knowing the genre helps you to anticipate the structure – a story is composed of a plot, characters, setting, theme, etc- Poetry uses verse, narrative, alliteration, rhyme, metaphors- information books may have headings, maps, vocabulary index etc.

Steps by step approach to handling comprehension passages
● Getting to the main idea
Often it is contained in the first sentence. In longer passages it may be reflected in the title, heading or concluding statements
● Identifying cause- effect relationships
It refers to how the events relate to each other. Words that indicate cause effect are 'because' 'as a result', 'due to'etc
● Identifying fact and opinion
Facts are established truths and opinions are personal judgements and are often expressed by comparisons (strongest, heaviest, best) or adjectives (brilliant, useless)
● Drawing inferences
Inferences are deduced from the information provided in the text. It is not clearly stated but implied by the context
● Compare and contrast
While comparing focuses on similarities contrast focuses on differences. For comparing and contrasting we need to use the information we already know- words that denote comparison may be 'similarly', 'likewise', 'in the same way', 'just as'. Words that denote contrast may be 'however', 'conversely', 'yet', 'nevertheless' etc.
● Sequencing
Means giving an order to the events – what happened before, what followed etc. Words that indicate sequence are 'first', 'then', 'finally', 'at last'.
● Drawing conclusions

Aims to consider all that has been said and interpret this information. It is a summary statement. Strategies to Improve Comprehension There is a big difference in being able to read words and in being able to comprehend the meaning of the

sentences you read. Although word recognition, fluency and decoding are the effective tools for proficient reading, the ability to comprehend is the ultimate goal of any reading. The ability to understand a text is a prerequisite to acquire content knowledge in a way that it enables you to express and discuss your ideas and opinions. There are many comprehension strategies that work together like a finely tuned machine. In fact there is a wide range of reading strategies that are suggested by instructions. But one must remember that different texts require different strategies and different approaches. The use of the right approach for a particular text is very important because it enables the reader to interact with the text and to develop an understanding of the information in hand. The choice of the right strategy helps you to improve your reading comprehension by providing you with a set of instructions that help you to develop and retain comprehension. Comprehension strategies are conscious plans made by the reader to become purposeful and active readers. They are a set of steps that help to keep the reader actively involved in the test. While some texts are simple and pose little challenge of comprehension there are some others like in philosophy or research which require the reader to have prior knowledge of the subject. To unfold the meaning inherent in such texts requires one to follow a set of instructions that gently guide you through the text. Following are some of the strategies that may help you improve your comprehension:

1. Ability to monitor one's comprehension: In order to improve your comprehension skills you should know exactly your level of comfort and understanding with what you read. Along with this you should be able to identify areas of poor understanding and also know how to fix the problem.

2. Meta recognition: Meta recognition is the art of learning to "think about thinking i.e. to think about and have contact over reading. To do this, you frame a set a checks before you attempt comprehension of a text. You have to preview the text and clarify the purpose of reading. While reading you monitor your understanding and control the pace of your reading accordingly. As you proceed to adjunct your speed to suit the level of difficulty of the text and keep 'fixing' the problems as they arise. After completing you analyse what you have understood from the text. When you stumble you have to ask yourself, where is the difficulty, what is the difficulty, break up that line into parts and try to rephrase it. Another way of doing this is by looking backward or forward in a text to resolve the difficulty.

3. QAR Strategy: The question answer relationship strategy teaches students to answer questions to demonstrate comprehension. At times the answers to the questions are quite explicit i.e. they are directly stated in the text. The information is 'right there' and you only have to locate it in the text. At other times the information is implicit i.e. has to be inferred from the text. It is not stated directly but is implied

and the student has to dig out the information based on his/her background knowledge. These types of questions are the 'think and search' type because the answer may be found in more than one place in the text. Then there are questions that are based on what you already know after reading the text. In answering such questions you have to have a fair idea of the whole text and relate your prior knowledge in answering the questions. Lastly there are may be questions that are totally "one your own" type of questions where the text bears no direct relationship with the question and only serves as supplementary reading. Answers to such questions come on the basis of your prior knowledge and experiences.

4. Graphic and Semantic Organizers/Story Board/Chain of Events: Graphic and semantic organisms facilitate learning by illustrating the concepts used in a text through diagrams, flowcharts and other pictorial methods. They function like picture books and convey the information at a glance. They serve as short cuts to summarize texts. Some like venn diagram help to compare and contrast while some like pie charts help present percentage distribution. Story Boards help to sequence events within a text and trace the steps involved in a process giving it a holistic look. They are also used to chart out the structure of a story – the main characters, setting, events, problem and moral if any. Sometimes cause effect tables are also used to illustrate cause and effects told within a text. Visualizing creates a mental image in the mind of the reader by bring words to life. Asking sensory questions helps students to become better at visualizing.

5. Summarizing: Summarizing is a great tool in the hands of readers to comprehend the text better. Summarizing means putting in your own words what you have understood from a text. It helps to eliminate unnecessary information. It also enables the reader to identify the main idea and to connect it with the supporting details. Summarizing also helps to pen down all that is relevant and important in a text and needs to be remembered.

6. Generating questions: Finding answer to the 'WH' questions – Who, When, Where, What, Why, How – is another way of arriving at an understanding of a given text. By asking these questions and trying to answer them, students can combine the information from different segments of the text and comprehend it as a whole.

7. Recognizing Structure: Having an outline structure with tentative sub categories expected in the story of text helps to fill in the gaps of information and provides a structure. It may be setting, characters, events, problems and resolution or cause-effect relationship or comparing and contrasting. Categorization helps to break down the information into parts which helps to understand it better. You create a kind of movie in your mind of the text and are able to visualize it. It helps readers to make

inferences by merging text clues that lead to the conclusions about underlying themes or ideas.

RAPID REVIEW

● A process of reading that helps a reader to uncover the layers of meaning and lead to an understanding or comprehension of the text in hand is called Close Reading
● The aim of close reading is to activate good reading strategies and to make you reflect on "How and What to Think"? about a text.
● Purposes of close reading – pleasure, knowledge, information, understanding and appreciation
● The word comprehension is derived from the word 'comprehend' which mean "to understand". Components of effective reading and better comprehension:
● Ability to interpret and evaluate information and ideas
● Ability to link or connect this information to what you already know
● Ability to adjust the current knowledge to accommodate new ideas and look at them with a fresh perspective
● Ability to identify the main idea and key points in the text
● Ability to read between the lines to understand underlying meanings.